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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 5807
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1936
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 0115
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 7016
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SUBJECT: PAPER AIRPLANE AND PANDA NAMING CONTEST WINNERS
HIGHLIGHT PLIGHT OF STATELESS PERSONS IN THAILAND

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Classified By: POL Counselor George Kent, reason 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (U) Summary: Two recent high profile feel-good cases involving stateless children winning nationwide contests with overseas trip prizes have drawn attention to the plight of those in Thailand who lack citizenship. Mong Thongdee, the Chiang Mai-born son of Burmese migrants, won a national paper airplane contest, and a Thai-born ethnic Lahu girl took third place in the competition to name the panda cub born at the Chiang Mai zoo. Thai bureaucrats clumsy handling of whether the pair was eligible for travel documents to claim their prizes in Japan and China, respectively, forced PM Abhisit to intervene through a photo op meeting with Mong, thrust the students' plight and the treatment of migrants and hilltribes to the fore of public discussion for several weeks.

¶2. (C) Comment: The status of stateless persons -- inclusive of migrants and highland minorities -- is a challenge that the Thai Government has long appeared reluctant to address, and is connected to an ongoing struggle over how to define what it means to be Thai. Abhisit's actions and the extended public discussion, often critical, about why children born in Thailand are treated this way are positive steps forward, as was the 2008 Nationalities Act. But the difficulties in achieving a common-sense solution show that old-style, narrow views of what it means to be Thai still linger. End summary and comment.

Paper Airplane Flap: Grounded by heartless bureaucrats

¶3. (U) Over the past weeks, the Bangkok press has exhaustively covered the case of Mong Thongdee, a photogenic 12 year old ethnic Shan boy born in Thailand to legally registered Burmese migrant workers. Mong -- who is de facto defined as a stateless person according to Thai law -- won a national paper airplane competition, the prize for which was to travel to Japan to represent Thailand at an international paper airplane contest. Unfortunately for Mong, while Thai law technically authorizes the issuance of travel documents to stateless people, he encountered obstacles along the way.

¶4. (U) Coverage of Mong,s case exploded after a Ministry of Interior spokesman told the media that allowing the boy to travel would "jeopardize national security." Interior

Minister Chaovarat Chanveerakul later piled on, callously suggesting that Mong represent Burma in the paper airplane contest instead. The Interior Ministry and the National Security Council both refused to issue Mong Thongdee travel documents or an exit permit, claiming that only the MFA or the Immigration Bureau had that authority. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) expressed sympathy for the boy's plight, but pleaded impotence in the matter, noting that the issue fell outside of the MFA's authority.

PM to the Rescue: Cleared for Takeoff

15. (SBU) Fortunately for Mong, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, who actively promotes "new Thailand" values and no doubt sensed a political opportunity too good to pass up, took up his cause. Responding to a tear-filled, televised plea from Mong himself, Abhisit subsequently met with the boy before cameras rolling, sending the signal that the bureaucrats should stop creating roadblocks and issue Mong papers. Finally, on September 3, Mong received the necessary travel documents.

Pandamania: Naming Contestant Winner Treated poorly

16. (U) On the heels of Mong's saga, the media picked up the story of Naruay Jaterng, a 14-year old student who took third place in a contest to name the panda cub, born earlier this year at the Chiang Mai zoo; the adorable cub has captivated Thailand in 2009 and often stolen headlines away from the political drama. Naruay collected 100,000 baht (approx. \$3,000) in prize money and also won a four-day trip to Chengdu, China in mid-November. As an ethnic Lahu from

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Thailand's northern highlands born to Thai-registered parents, Naruay was technically eligible for Thai citizenship. However, because her parents did not register her birth with the local district office, she did not have the national identity card required as proof of citizenship. Initially, authorities prohibited Naruay from travelling to Bangkok to receive her cash prize, and refused to provide her travel documents to leave Thailand.

17. (SBU) Provincial/interior authorities relented somewhat, allowing Naruay to travel to Bangkok on September 10 to collect her prize money. However, bureaucratic roadblocks still hamper her attempts to obtain international travel documents. While she is entitled to an identity card because many hill tribes previously denied Thai citizenship are now eligible under the 2008 Nationality Act, birth certificate issuances normally take about a year, too late for the November panda trip. Interior Ministry officials have promised to speed up her nationality process. Chiang Mai officials claim that Naruay's trip to China should not be a problem, as Thailand's highland ethnic groups have permission to travel abroad if they can produce "authentic identity documents." The hitch for now is that she does not yet have one.

18. (U) This cable was coordinated with ConGen Chiang Mai.
JOHN